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Research on Clickbait Effect of Phrasing in Media Contents' Titles

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Abstract: The research is about how the phrasing in the media contents' title and cover picture, including word choices, ways of speaking, and forms of expression in pictures, affects the audiences' willingness to click and read; it also aims at analyzing the timeliness of certain styles of phrasing, such as whether the traditional and old phrasing styles will be less effective with time moving forward. Upon the purposes, the research includes a survey and an interview after it. The survey includes basic questions to test how do the participants react to certain ways of phrasing; the interview provides as a clarification to the purpose and the function of each question in the survey, then asks the participants to declare their feeling during the survey and how do they subjectively feel about the usage of phrasing in media titles and cover pictures. Following the research and analysis, the following conclusion is reached: using phrasing in media titles and covers is effective in increasing audiences' willingness to click and read; traditional phrasing becomes less effective, and new forms of phrasing prove to be more effective.

Keywords: phrasing, willingness, clickbait, rebellious psychology

1. Introduction

The research is based on modern communications investigations. Scholars had been discussing how to increase audiences' willingness to click on online media ever since the beginning of the Internet era, and clickbait was invented as a solution. "Generally, clickbait utilizes erotic words, misleading contents, unverified news and exaggerated tones to achieve their goals [1]." However, the development of the Internet environment is fast and the style of phrasing is also changing.

The majority of studies in the fields focused on a specific point in time to determine whether a clickbait is effective or not; what this article is attempting to do is analyze whether the old, traditional way of phrasing – outdated clickbait – is still effective and whether new ones can replace the traditional ones. In another word: is clickbait sustainable or it must evolve to keep capture the audiences' attention?

Through a combination of a survey and an interview, the participants will unconsciously show their preferences toward clickbait from different generations. The research will show the importance of creating a new and more advanced style of phrasing. Traditional and outdated phrasing may be more famous to many content producers and platform organizers; they are highly likely to allocate more resources on the contents with the traditional phrasing styles because these styles helped them in the past in promoting contents. This may lead to a waste of resources and a non-ideal outcome.

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2. Theoretical Basis and Underlying Logic

Ever since the very first place where stories and secrets worth spreading existed, how to attract audiences became a topic worth considering. With the progression of digital communication, the enormous commercial value of information and stories also gradually became obvious. When one publishes content online – no matter in what form (article, Twitter, picture, video, etc) – more viewing, comments, and like-button clicked represent a larger amount of profit from various possible ways: the rewards from the platform, advertisements, and the degree of the content's famousness which means better management of the account. "In October 2017, for example, Facebook rolled out an experimental redesign to its central Newsfeed feature that separated posts from individual users and posts by "pages" (like those run by media companies) into separate feeds. Local media companies in the targeted countries—including Slovakia and Cambodia - reported drops of up to 75% in their audience size, making their business models untenable [2]". This example shows that there's a huge difference between whether the audiences understand that they are going to read a "professionally designed" commercial post or not - some companies are on the edge of bankruptcy when the audiences realize the content is from them.

Thus, the "phrasing" of the title and the cover picture reveal their importance. With the same content, different phrasing in the title and selection on the cover picture can affect the audiences' willingness to view psychologically. Another evidence supporting this judgment is that even the Chinese government - one of the largest political institutes in the world - are applying "phrasing" to form clickbites and attract the citizens' attention [3].

Because of the limitations on the length of the title and the size of the image, only a small amount of information can be included when audiences first interact with the published content; additionally, it is not clever to reveal the most appealing part of the story in the title; otherwise, audiences will not click on the content if they already know what's important or interesting. Given the listed consequences, a system of phrasing was established and used on newspapers, radio, and TV. However, with the development of communication and the increasing ability for everyone to publish content online, the same phrasing system's psychological effect is also changing. The concept "click bait" means the title or cover that uses phrasing to induce the audience to click on it, but the word choice "bait" indicates that many audiences feel annoyed by the decision of using the phrasing. "Clickbait decreases users' satisfaction substantially because users feel a gap between what they want to know (the headline) and what they really read (the content) [4]". It shows that many audiences are tired of viewing these phrased titles and covers. "Using the Persuasion Knowledge Model, we predict that clickbait tactics may be perceived by some readers as a manipulative attempt, leading to source derogation where the publisher may be perceived as less competent and trustworthy [5]."

In this paper, the history of the "established phrasing system" and how its effects on the audience changed from positive to negative with the development of digital media will be studied. To discuss why increasing audiences are feeling negative emotions toward the established phrasing system, the concept "rebellious psychology" is necessary to be introduced. In the study done by Gupta and Singh in 1979, besides economic activities and political related activities, actions of pursuing leisure are also easy to trigger rebellious psychology that makes people active with a negative attitude toward certain content [5]. Surfing online, as well as browsing content from media for most people, is leisure pursuing action and is easy to trigger rebellious psychology if it feels manipulated.

The hypothesis of the research is: that although in the beginning certain forms of phrasing in media contents' titles and cover pictures were effective in attracting audiences, the latter gradually started to experience rebellious psychology with the same forms of phrasing so these forms, on the contrary, decrease the audience's willingness to read nowadays.

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3. Methodology

The research will be practiced in the form of a combination of interviews and surveys.

The survey will include questions on three different topics - how the phrasing works, how the phrasing is overly used after the overuse does the effect of the original phrasing change, and how the phrasing changes after the traditional ones are under overuse - in random order.

The participants will be required to provide demographic information, online platforms they are using, as well as the age of surfing online. It is helpful to compare those who have a long history of surfing online and those who don't. The amount of exposure to a similar form of phrasing affects its attention-attracting effect. If those who have a long surfing history show a stronger negative attitude toward a certain form of phrasing compared to those who don't, the hypothesis of rebellious psychology would be proved and supported.

3.1 Overview of Decision Tree Algorithm

To show that the clickbait phrasing is effective in uplifting the audiences' willingness to view the actual content, a comparison between different ways of speaking and different cover pictures is effective. Participants will examine and comment on various titles and cover images about a specific event, some with professional phrasing and others without, and decide which is more appealing. Because this research also covers the rebellious psychology of phrasing, instead of asking the participants which ones they feel more attractive, the questions are supposed to ask about which titles and covers of them are more professional or more well-designed.

About whether the traditional phrasing in title and covers is overly-used and are audiences feeling the rebellious psychology facing this overuse, the survey would provide questions about whether similar contents are using similar (or same) patterns of phrasing and how frequently the traditional phrasing form appears on social media. The result of the above questions provides a conclusion of whether audiences think the phrasing form is repetitive. A comment section that allows the participants to answer freely and focuses on their feeling about the overuse/not-overused phrasing is also going to be included to see their attitudes toward phrasing.

Phrasing is only a marketing technique for the content included in the media. Content producers online will only change the form of phrasing when the traditional ones are under overuse; the technique itself won't be given up. To examine the effectiveness of the new phrasing forms and which one of them is most effective, questions similar to the previous section (about whether traditional phrasings are effective) on the new phrasing forms will be included. These questions would directly ask the participants whether they feel attracted by the phrased title and cover to see whether the new forms are effective. All questions appear in random order, so the audience won't know which question targets the traditional phrasing form and which ones target the new one; thus, the audience's attitude will be clear.

In the survey, in total sixteen options were provided to the participants to ask whether they think the title or the cover picture can be told to be well-designed to attract audiences. Within the options, 8 out of 16 implemented traditional phrasing methods.

In the other 2 questions, the survey asks the participants to select the options that are more attractive. Six of the sixteen options use new forms of phrasing style that are intended to attract audiences but in a more casual and closer to everyday life manner.

3.2 Data Collection

There's total of 18 participants in the research. The demographic distribution of the participants are as follows:

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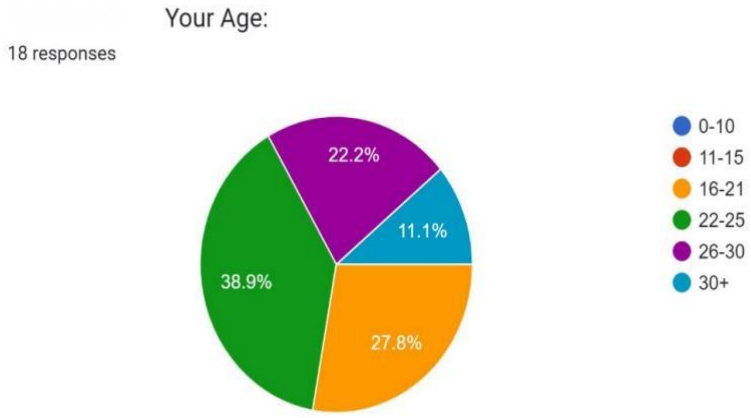


Figure.1 "Your age" statistical ratio diagram

And all of the participants claimed that they are experienced online surfer that they all have more than 5 years of surfing time:

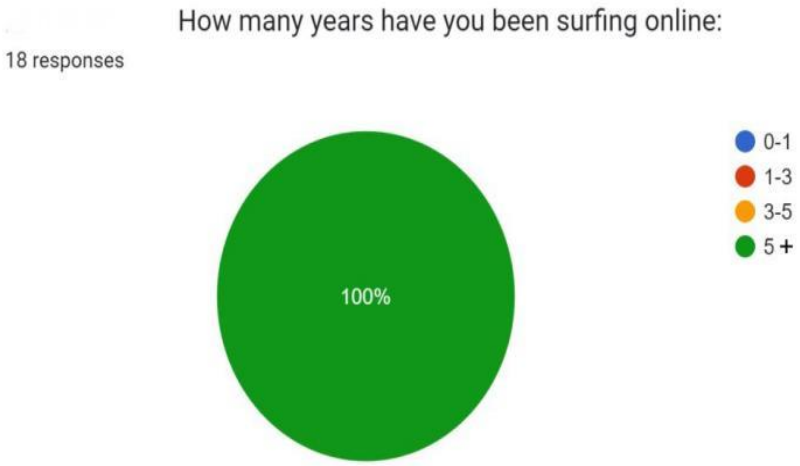


Figure.2 "Number of surfing sears" statistical ratio diagram

Following graph shows the preference of using different apps. The list from top to bottom is: WeChat (Daily Communication App), Weibo (Similar to Twitter), Bilibili (Video Platform, similar to Youtube), Zhihu (Q&A Platform, similar to Quora), Xiaohongshu (Daily posts with pictures), Douban (Film, books, and art comments and reviews), Others.

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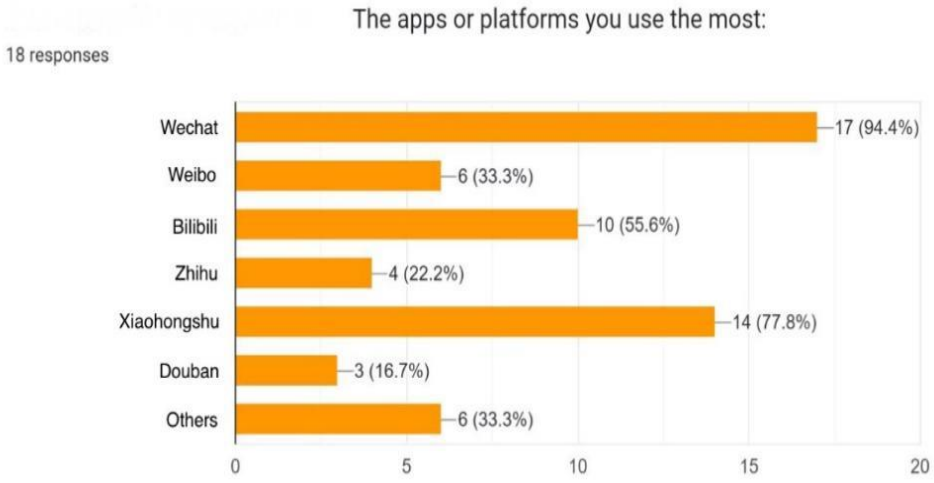


Figure.3 "Apps used" histogram

The participants, though are all experienced online surfers, spent different amounts online per day: 27.8% spend 2-3 hours and another 27.8% spend 3-5 hours, 22.2% spend more than 5 hours, 16.7 spend 1-2 hours, and 5.6 spend 0.5-1 hour.

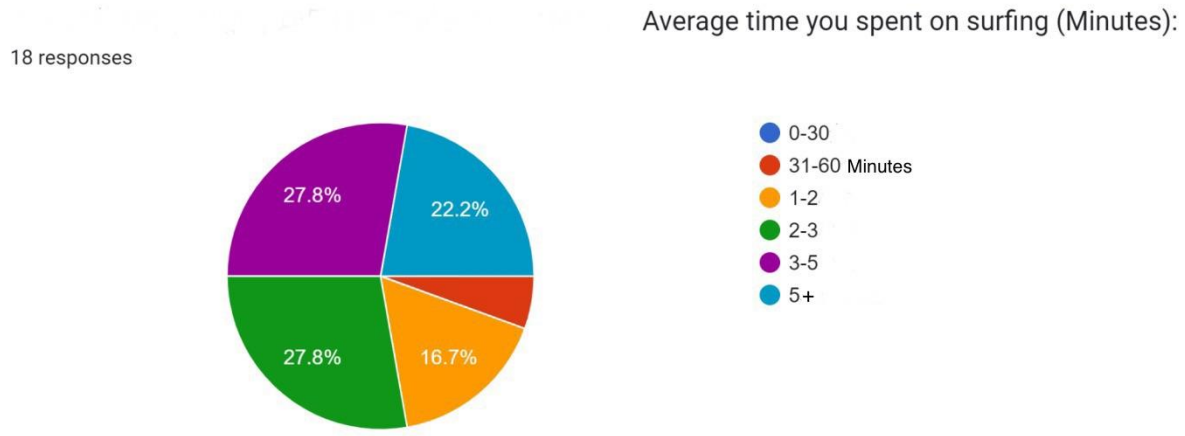


Figure.4 "Average time surfing per day" statistical ratio diagram

3. Results and Findings

The survey is done in person to ensure reliability; an interview will be practiced right after the survey is finished. The interview is intended to fulfill the deficiency of the survey. To collect opinions and attitudes, even information, a survey is useful; but a survey can hardly transmit concepts to the participants. It is hardly meaningful to include a paragraph in the survey about “what is phrasing” or “how did the phrasing work” because participants won’t pay sufficient attention to them.

The demographic distribution of the participants is relatively young among internet users. 38.9% of the participants are between 22-25; 27.8% are between 16-21; 22.2% are between 26-30, and the rest are over 30 years old. The result of the survey will show the attitude of the younger generation.

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All participants claim that they have more than 5 years of online-surfing experience. Thus, although the survey won't tell the attitude of those online surfers with little experiences toward traditional and new forms of phrasing, the result will reflect clearly how those experienced online surfers feel about the phrasing.

22.2% of participants claimed that they use over 5 hours of social media per day; 27.8% claimed that they spend 3-5 hours and another 27.8% spend about 2-3 hours. Including 16.7% who state they spend 1-2 hours per day, over 90% of the participants claim they use social media at least 1 hour per day. The majority of the participants spend more than 2 hours per day. Again, this leads the survey to a specialized result that will reveal the attitude of the experienced online surfers.

In the interview, the interviewer should explain the purpose and idea of the previous survey – including all concepts like "traditional phrasing" or "overuse" – to the participants to prepare them for upcoming questions. The participants have to understand clearly which questions are about traditional phrasing, how is the traditional form of phrasing overused, why the new phrasing forms are effective compared to old ones, etc.

After the preparation, the interview's core section is a discussion on the participant's experience and attitude toward phrasing. In recent years, entertainment and social platforms enable more people to publish content online, thus the usage of phrasing has also increased a lot. This relationship between the development of the Internet and the overuse of phrasing is also discussed.

First, the problem of whether phrasing increases the audiences' willingness to read has a conclusive result: among the 32 options provided to the participants for different questions, 20 options are selected for either: the option uses a traditional phrasing method that can be identified, so participants considered it professionally designed; or the option is attractive and can be told that it is well-designed.It is reasonable to state that phrasing is effective in uplifting the audiences' willingness to click on the content.

When it comes to the comparison between traditional and current style of phrasing, the results show that the traditional style of phrasing is still effective, but not as effective as current ones.

According to the survey, 11 options have a much higher rate of selection compared to the rest; all 8 options with traditional phrasing methods are included within the selection. The result shows that the traditional phrasing methods were effective in uplifting the audiences' interest to click on the content: they are qualified click-bait phrasing. However, audiences nowadays are familiar enough with the traditional method that they will recognize those titles and cover pictures that are designed to attract audiences. The 3 abnormal options are also implementing click-bait phrasing methods, only that they are not in traditional style but in new forms. The reason they were selected is that the participants lack knowledge about the differences between old and new forms of phrasing; they are familiar with some of the new forms also and consider them as "professionally designed". In the follow-up interview after the survey, most participants agreed that the 3 abnormal ones are different from the traditional 8 and are more willing to click on the 3 abnormal ones because they appeared less often.

For the question mainly about current phrasing style, the result was out of expectation to some extent. The participants selected 3 options out of 8 in the question about phrasing used in the media's titles. The selected options are exactly the 3 options that implemented the new form of phrasing. However, in the question about whether a cover picture is attractive, the most selected option has a dog picture and a caption "a man transforms himself into a dog". The case included in the option is using a traditional phrasing method but the traditionally phrased caption is printed on the picture.

However, the other options with new style phrasing are all selected. Thus, the unexpected selection is not a huge variation to the whole research. The result of the survey actually shows that the new style of phrasing is more attractive to the young experienced online surfers; the traditional forms will

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eventually turn boring and for the ones who spent lots of time online, the transition from attractive to rebellious already happened.

4. Conclusion

Combining the results from the survey and the discussion in the interview, a final conclusion about the particular participant is concluded. This conclusion demonstrates that the participants, young experienced social media users, understood the "phrasing" in the media title and cover prior to this research, were affected by the "phrasing" (either conditionally or not), realized the overuse of it, and felt rebellious psychology.

One result came out was that audiences nowadays are pretty sensitive to any form of clickbait phrasing - they had experienced various forms of phrasing that are designed to attract their attention and make them want to click on. The audiences are able to tell which titles and cover pictures are professionally designed. Also, there are already multiple technical ways to detect clickbaits and similar styles of phrasing nowadays, which makes it almost impossible for the clickbaits to stay unrecognized [6]. This condition also helps the current form of phrasing, which is to make the title and cover picture seem like an ordinary daily life post. Even if the audience realizes that the titles are well designed, an ordinary-daily-feeling title makes the audiences feel less manipulated than a traditional style phrasing title.

Because of the limitations of research time and promotion methods, the number of participants is not as high as expected. This will to a certain extent affect the results, but since the conclusion this article is reaching is a general trend and not a precise number or percentage, the affection won't be very influential on the conclusion.

In the future, the research will be focusing on the underlying logic of phrasing in the title and cover picture. Understanding what is attractive and why they are attractive to the audience, and understanding the way to form a title and cover picture containing such elements is the ultimate goal of this research. Also, phrasing is very general and it doesn't limit to words and pictures. In the future, there will definitely be new forms of marketing from multiple perspectives including but not limited to sound, interactive experiences, and physical contacts. How to apply effective "phrasing" in the new areas is also a direction for future research.

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